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News

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******The King of Babylon stood at the highway where the roads fork and decided upon divination by looking into the liver...Ezekial 21:28.*

DALLAS--Throughout the ages physicians and laymen alike have had some pretty strange ideas about the workings of the liver and cures for its diseases:

- * An ancient Greek story claims that Zeus sent a vulture each night to eat Prometheus' regenerating liver as a punishment for the lad's stealing fire from the gods and giving it to man.
- * The Babylonians believed a sheep's liver could be used to prophesy, a custom which preceded astrology.
- * Clay models of the liver, which were considered "the seat of life" were also used by Babylonian priests to diagnose illnesses.
- * The ancient physician Galen reported that "a certain man who fulfilled his desires by committing adultery with another man's wife was smitten on his liver."
- * Galen further warned that the liver "is the seat of lust and its beginnings."

Writing sometime after 192 A.D., Galen passed on the "humors" theory. He thought that the liver turned food directly into blood and that abnormal "humors"--blood and yellow, black and white bile--caused localized disease. Then these diseases spread through the body as vapors in the blood. Since he thought the liver constantly renewed the blood anyway, Galen believed in "bleeding" the patient so that the diseased humors could be replaced by the healthy.

For hardness of the liver, Galen suggested "remedies which very mildly cool during their action, mixed with warm medications." This is because "the liver is like a congealed liquid and if one greatly softens it, its strength will dissolve," he said. Walking, both before and after meals and trying to restore normal digestion was suggested for obstruction of the liver.

Much of Galen's medical philosophy was based on the teachings of Aristotle. In the same way, Galen's theories gained followers. One of these was Moses Maimonides, who also followed these "humorous" teachings. Maimonides placed the liver second to the heart in importance in the body's hierarchy, which shows he was on the right track.

Maimonides painted a grim picture of liver disease: high fever; thirst; total aversion to food; the tongue's turning red and then black; egg-yolk yellow vomit changing to dark green; pain on the right side of the clavicle; a mild cough and spreading pain. The cures he suggested were even grimmer: mixtures of oil-cooked wormwood poured into the liver and stomach; strict diets of barley gruel; purgatives of safflower seeds and other laxatives followed by water, honey, borax and sodium bicarbonate enemas.

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first add liver

Often used along with these and other ancient cures for liver diseases were "the waters." Water treatments come in all kinds. The water is for dipping, drinking, douching and steaming. Their "medicinal energy" has been associated with cultures from "the conquering Romans to the modern Turks to the roving red Indian, led by instinct to the springs of Saratoga." The "white man," also, liked bathing at Saratoga so well that he turned the area into a popular resort, and the Indians could no longer afford it.

The treatments have been prescribed for nearly anything and are often associated with stories of miracles or fountains-of-youth. No matter how far-fetched the water cure, even today you can usually find some friend who will suggest that it is good for your liver. In fact, European restaurants today serve several brands of bottled water including information on the label that the product is good for the liver.

Word-of-mouth was especially important in the New World where citizens not rich enough to come it to Saratoga had to rely to a great extent on their own experiences of "doctoring." One hundred years after Boston was founded there was only one trained physician in the city. The common man relied heavily on barber-surgeons, midwives and patent medicines imported from England.

Even in England there was a dire shortage of doctors. Each of the members of the London College of Physicians at that time could have been assigned a case load of 1,300 patients a day. Thus there were both small and large fortunes made from quackery and apothecary on either side of the ocean.

A Boston newspaper carried the very first apothecary ad in 1761. Charles Russell's shop in Charlestown was advertised "at the Sign of Galen's Head opposite the 3 Cranes and near his Ferry." Among the many patent medicines sold there, as in other shops in the colonies, were both "universals" and other specific cures for diseases of the liver.

Two of our founding fathers were interested in medicine to the extent that they pushed the common man even farther into reliance on patent medicines. Benjamin Franklin and his followers developed a series of electrical devices--which shocked the people treated, as well as their organs--and led to an outrage at quackery. Another great of history, Benjamin Rush, developed a theory that all disease is caused by the excitability of blood vessels. Thus, there was a revival of bleeding and purging. It's no wonder that patent medicines were preferred by the less brave.

William Henry Harrison, one of our early presidents, was literally pushed to his death by doctors who administered purges, emetics and drugs containing even such horrible ingredients as raw petroleum and cocaine, and weakened him by extensive bleeding. Harrison's "bad cold" went into pneumonia and his liver gave out. He died in the White House exactly one month after he had taken office.

A movement for every man's being responsible for his medical care was given momentum by a New Hampshire farmer named Samuel Thompson. A believer in the four humors, he fought to find a universal cure to establish balance in every ill body. He wrote:

*My system's founded on this truth
Man's Air and Water, Aire and Earth,
And death is cold, and life is heat
These temper'd well, you are complete.*

Thompson prescribed steam baths, emetics, purgatives, enemas and his elixirs. Instead of patenting the medicines, he formed a botanical society which sold--for only \$1--his book which gave directions for making and using his remedies since he had not been successful in finding a universal cure. The privilege of using these methods was conferred on members only. Physicians, however, were charged \$500 by Thompson, who hated the breed. Then they were required to swear secrecy and loyalty before a justice of the peace.

A boost was given to the patent medicine business by the Civil War when a chance to be patriotic mixed with early advertising efforts. A verse for Dr. Scott's pills, used for liver and other ailments, was printed on an envelope in 1861:

*To cure secession and its illls
Take Dr. Scott's Cast Iron Pills,
Well mixed with Powder of Saltpetre,
Apply it to each "FireEater."
With Union Bitters, mix it clever,
And treason is warned off forever.*

Among the other advertising gimmicks, such as songs, handbills and paperweights, was one for a unique liver-and-kidney cure. A china platter with a picture of Mrs. Grover Cleveland carried a message for this cure.

Some people concocted their own cures. Poultices for the area above the liver were commonly made from a plant with leaves shaped like the liver. These were called liverwarts, and it was thought that Nature shaped the leaves in this manner to give man a clue to this therapeutic use. Later drug stores commonly stocked "liver pads," which were full of medicinals, to be placed on the skin over the liver for "stimulation."

Universals, however, pushed by medicine shows and patent medicine manufacturers, had become more important than specific cures for diseases. In 1890 William Radam wrote that "To delay for the sake of diagnosis is simply a waste of valuable time." He also pointed an accusing finger at doctors in hospitals:

"He will stop at the bedside of the patient...spend ½ an hour pounding and thumping him, listening to his heart and lungs and going through a tedious ceremony, simply to try to diagnose some minute points which have nothing whatsoever to do with the cure or with the mode of treatment that the disease calls for...Then they pour poisons down their throats and chop them up with knives."

Americans seemed to want to take something. In 1915 90 percent of the drugs sold were non-prescription. Additional problems for drug-taking patients with liver and other diseases were often alcoholism and drug addiction. A letter to Hosteller & Smith from Internal Revenue in 1857 said:

"...to draw the line nicely, and fix definitely where the medicine may end and the alcoholic beverage begin, is a task which has often perplexed and still greatly perplexes revenue officers, and especially where a preparation combines so large a proportion of alcoholic spirits as yours does..."

The manufacturer claimed their bitters were almost free of alcohol--"no more than beer." And such addictions as cocaine and opium were often added to the patent medicines.

Fortunately, the federal government has challenged these drugs and forced manufacturers to "shape up" or get off the market, as well as to withdraw false advertising claims in recent years. Most famous of the cases was for Carter's Little Liver Pills, which apparently did nothing for the liver. In fact, it took the government 16 years to remove the word "liver" from the product and its advertising. Also, in the late 40's and 50's Hadacol was so popular that it had a country and western song written in its praise and a small New Mexico town named in its honor. Containing a tremendous amount of alcohol, it early claimed cures for specific diseases, like liver ailments and later to "restore youthful feelings and appearance and ensure 'good health.'"

Hopefully, says Dr. Burton Combes, liver researcher at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, we will never return to the days, as described in this old patent-medicine ad, when:

*That mushrooms were growing all over my liver
That something was loose in my heart
That due to my spleen all my nerves had turned green
And my lungs were not doing their part.
I wrote Dr. Sharke and got an answer,
"The wart on your thumb is incipient cancer."*

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WITH GRATEFUL APPRECIATION TO DR. JONATHON ERLIN, HISTORICAL LIBRARY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER AT DALLAS...